



**crushed velvet and winter sweats by
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Summary: (Prompt: Christmas & presents.) "What are you thinking about?" Mike asks her. (Your hair. Your face. That soft hand-knitted blanket upstairs and the sweater you wore a few years ago.) [It's Christmas, and all El wants is one of Mike's sweaters.]

crushed velvet and winter sweats

"It's a sweater," he tells her with a shrug.

(El has just been handed a thick, oversized present. It's wrapped with red and gold striped paper; there's glitter sticking to her fingers already. The tag is addressed to "*Jane*".)

(The old woman that just gave it to her — short in stature, dark graying hair and thick-rimmed glasses — simply kissed El on the forehead, pinched her cheeks between pruney fingers, called her "*sweetheart*" and then shoved the gift between her hands with a smile before leaving the two teens alone.)

El frowns, "A sweater?" Mike nods in confirmation. He looks disinterested — not in her but in the parcel she's holding between her hands.

"Yeah, she makes them for everyone, like, every year." Mike folds his arms over his chest, hands wrapping over his thin biceps. He glances around the room, "come to think of it actually, I didn't get one this year."

El squints, teasing, "Are you jealous?" She licks her lips, taking a step closer, "You can have this one?"

"No! No, no. You keep that." Mike lays a hand on the present, cringing as the wrapping paper rustles beneath his touch. "Yeah, that's for *you*. I guess it means she's welcomed you into the family or something." he says, and then he stills, withdrawing his hand and running it through his hair, "You know, not like *that*, but... Well, like, extended- Not extended family. That's not-" he stops himself, breathes, "My nana just- She likes to... *knit* things." He bounces on the heels of his feet, nodding his head and moving one hand to cup El's cheek in his palm, calming.

"Nana?"

"Yeah, my nana- That was my nana." He tells her, and he moves his hand from her face to stick his thumb out over his shoulder, pointing

to where the short lady has wandered off into the kitchen, "She can be pretty... abrupt."

"Right." El giggles and she holds the present up to her chest then, "Wait, Nana?" She asks, left eyebrow raised in mock confusion, a small smile taking over her face, "Is she *okay*?"

It takes him a second, but then he remembers.

"Yeah," he says, eyes widening in realization as his cheeks drain of all color. He nods, blinking, and then his gaze shifts, lowering to the floor in semi-embarrassment. He reaches back, scratching an irritable itch that's been dancing along his neck for a few seconds, "She's-"

"Mike," El lays a hand on his other arm then, fingers curling around the thick sweater covering his elbow. She scrunches the wool between her fingers, taking a step closer to the boy. "I'm just kidding." She pushes up on her tiptoes, the small heels of her Mary-Janes rising, "Chill."

"Right, yeah." He nods, again, swallowing down a breath so loud she practically *hears* it. Mike forces a smile, and he lowers his hand to rest it on her waist, thumb pressing to her hip bone, circling. Her dress is crushed velvet, black, perfect against her skin tone and dangerously soft to the touch. Mike gulps, "I'm totally chill. Totally." He tells her, head bobbing as though it'll convince her, him.

Dark brown hair falls into his face then, and El has to stop herself from brushing it back. If she touches it, touches him — any part, really, but most often his face — she'll want to kiss him and she can't do *that*. Not right now.

Karen is right over there and El is pretty sure, despite how warmly the woman greets her and how kind she treats her, that she wouldn't want her son and his girlfriend openly making out in their living room when it's full of his relatives — and extended family El is pretty sure he has no interest in talking to.

(Truth be told, she has no interest in getting to know them.)

(Maybe El can convince him to ask his mom if they can escape to the

basement, just for a little while. Maybe she can convince him to take her upstairs, lock his bedroom door and just *be*. Maybe she can convince him-)

"El?"

Snapping out of her daze then, she blinks up at the tall boy, lashes fluttering flirtatiously.

(Boys — well, men — like that. They like when girls are *flirty*. And the first thing you do when you want to be flirty is blink, like, really, really quickly... apparently. El's not sure how it works but she read it in a copy of *Cosmo* in the hair salon last week and so she figured she'd give it a try.)

Mike just stares down at her, brows furrowing as though he's pondering something, almost like he's taking in her features, memorizing them just because he can. El feels her cheeks flush ever so slightly under the intensity of his gaze, and she runs her hand down his arm, threading her fingers through his own just as she drops back down on her heels, "Yes?" She twists her ankles, licks her lips.

"What are you thinking about?" Mike asks her, eyebrows raised in question as he waits for her reply.

"Nothing."

(Your hair. Your face. That soft hand-knitted blanket upstairs and the sweater you wore a few years ago.)

(She wonders if his Nana made that one, too.)

"What, you're not thinking about how boring this stupid party is?" He snickers, shooting a quick glance around the room, "I am."

El frowns, and she tightens her hold on his hand, "But it's your party."

"It's my *mom's* party. She always does this, hosts these boring Christmas parties and invites, like, half of the neighborhood." He pulls a face, "Honestly, it just sucks that Lucas had to go to Alabama with his family. He could have been here with us." He glances down

at El, his frown replaced by a smile now, "You know because he lives next door. It's not like everyone else."

(Dustin and Max couldn't either make it or Karen hadn't extended invitations to them. Will had opted to stay back home with Joyce this year, saying something about not wanting to be the fourth wheel to Mike and El and mistletoe. He hadn't meant it in a rude way, so El had smiled, and he'd laughed, and then he'd helped her pack her bags for the drive back down to Hawkins.)

"Well, neighbors and weird uncles I've never even met," Mike shrugs, and El watches as the corners of his lips slowly turn up into a sheepish grin, "but it's kinda cool I guess because they give us money or, like, extra presents so... Nancy says they're overcompensating for never visiting or something."

El keeps her eyes locked on his face, peering up at him through her lashes, considering, "Over... compensating?"

"It's like when someone doesn't do enough, so then they do *too much* to make up for it." He explains, simply, "You know?"

(She thinks she does, thinks it's kind of like when Hopper missed Halloween that one year and made up for it with their first-ever 'Triple-Decker Eggo Extravaganza'. That had been *too much*. Maybe he'd been overcompensating then.)

"So you get *more* presents?" Her eyes widen, interest piqued, "More than other years?"

"Yeah, but like some of them are- I mean, they're not all great." He shakes his head, and his fingers tighten around her own, knuckles turning white, "Well, not great for me. Maybe for Holly or... hey, do you wanna see what I got? Maybe you'll want some of the stuff." He suggests, then stammers, "Not that you need it. You know, just because a bunch of your stuff got wrecked in the cabin and-"

Giving up her fight with temptation, El reaches up to brush his dark hair behind his ear. It's curling from the heat in the house, the radiator cranked up to keep everyone inside warm. It seems to silence him, too.

(She thinks maybe it's too hot, too stuffy. Mike's hair only curls in the humidity or when he's sweating, and she can see Jonathan tugging at the collar of his shirt across the room. She smirks at that.)

After a beat, she whispers, voice dipping, "Where is it?"

Mike frowns, leaning down to whisper back, "Where is what?"

She beams, "The presents."

"Oh," he swallows, and then he straightens and his eyes drift over to his mom. She's got a glass of wine in one hand, knelt beside Holly to fix the girl's braids as converses with some white-haired lady that El doesn't recognize.

Mike's cheeks flush a rose color that El likes — it reminds her of those pink flowers Jonathan bought her for her birthday: carnations. Mike bites the insides of his cheeks for a second, gnawing at the skin before blurting out, "They're upstairs."

El absentmindedly smooths her thumb along his jawline, stopping at the sharp curve by his ear. She drops her hand to his neck, palm flat against his skin, his pulse beating steadily beneath her touch.

She hums something below her breath, raising her brows in question, suggestion as her eyes drift up to meet his own, intense and dark, "Can we go?"

(The blanket. The sweater.)

"To my room?" Mike seems to consider it for a second. His eyes shift back and forth from El to his mother, and then back to El again, eventually lowering to her lips as they form a smile. He nods after a beat, nostrils flaring and long brows wiggling in eagerness, "Yeah."

He drops his hand from her side to grab the discarded present from the nearby table then, tucking it under his arm while all the while keeping a firm grasp of her hand with his left.

"Come on." Whipping around, Mike makes for the staircase by the front door, gently tugging El along behind him.

El notices Nancy watching them move about, a questioning look on her face as she slices off another piece of the half-eaten yule log, stood behind the kitchen counter with her shiny earrings dangling as the sharp knife glides through the desert.

But the older girl's obvious confusion turns to what El can only assume is understanding when Mike simply nods towards the staircase, and the younger brunette watches as her boyfriend's sister brings the piece of chocolate cake up to her lips with her fingertips, a knowing smirk taking over her sharp features — almost like she's in on some big secret, another conspiracy she's aching to uncover.

(El won't question it. Maybe it's an inside joke or something. Jonathan and Will have them, she knows. Joyce usually just says she's better off not understanding.)

(She sometimes thinks that siblings have bonds like no one else.)

(Maybe this is one of those times.)

"Ignore her," Mike mutters, shooting her a look over his shoulder as they reach the bottom of the staircase. He offers her a half-smile, moving up onto the second step.

His hand slides down hers to wrap around her wrist, and El reaches up with her free hand to grasp his forearm, forcing herself to keep up with him, with his long strides as he marches up the stairs.

Eventually, they reach the landing. El is pretty sure she heard Mr. Wheeler calling out for his son — something about needing him to help with the television — but she doesn't say anything, doesn't know if Mike would want her to.

It takes them all of three seconds to round the banister, for Mike to kick his bedroom door open and usher her inside. He tosses the wrapped parcel down on his bed across the room, and El watches as it lands with the softest thump on the thick blanket she'd once been had around her shoulders.

"Okay," Mike turns away from the door, having turned the lock closed. He wipes his hands down the sides of his burgundy chords,

brows raised in question as he takes in the sight of his girlfriend.

She's placed his grandmother's present aside and is now busy unfolding the throw that Mike keeps by the bottom of his bed.

(It's colder in here, she thinks. Maybe his radiator is broken.)

(Maybe the blanket will keep her warm.)

Mike smiles, amused, "What are you doing?" He asks, approaching slowly. He stops by the side of the bed, allowing her a moment to get comfy beneath the throw. She wraps it around her frame, pulling the thick material into her lap and balling the corners up in her fists. "El, is that why you wanted to come up here?"

"Can I keep this?"

"Sure," he shrugs, not caring about the item, and his hands slip into the front pockets of his trousers, "but...why?"

El ducks her gaze, nibbling at her bottom lip, "It reminds me of you." She tells him, earnest and quiet, "it reminds me of before."

He gets it then, "Oh." Mike nods, slow, and then he kneels in front of her, palms curling over the side of the bed frame, "Do you," the boy starts, and his hair falls into his face when he shakes his head, breathing deep, "do you want anything else that reminds you of me?"

(He sounds nervous; like he's afraid she'll say no or laugh.)

(She could never.)

"Do you remember last- Not last winter." She corrects herself with a sigh. El leans forward, and she sticks her hands out from beneath the blanket to grasp his own, tracing her fingertips down his palms, up to his wrists, "You had a sweater."

(Your nana probably knitted it, she thinks to add.)

(She doesn't.)

"You want one of my sweaters?"

"Yes."

(It's totally possible that he doesn't even have it anymore. He's outgrown his old clothes, after all.)

(She hopes it's somewhere, buried deep in the back of his closet.)

Mike grins, but it's obvious that he wants to laugh. "Which one?" He smirks and leans back on his heels. He reaches for her hands, linking their fingers together, "I have like, ten."

"Can I see them?"

"I guess-" There's a quiet knock on his bedroom door then, soft. He's not sure he would have heard it if El hadn't turned her head at the sound. "Hang on." He smiles, standing up quickly and pressing his lips to her forehead in a soft kiss.

El grins, watching as he backs over to the door and unlocks it.

(This can go one of two ways, she knows.)

(The door was shut. It wasn't open, not even slightly.)

"Mike!"

Holly is stood in the hallway, ribbon of her sequined dress hanging loose and her braids undone. She's got a small plastic box in her hands and she's peering up at Mike with wide eyes and an upset look on her face.

"What is it, Hols?"

"Mom was doing my makeup but," the younger Wheeler starts, and then she shifts her attention from her brother to El sat on the bed. A bashful smile takes over the little girl's features then, and she glances down at the box in her hands, "Can you do it?" She asks, hopeful.

El grins, and she quickly pushes the throw from off of one shoulder, the blue and red patchwork hanging over her black dress, "Of course." She sits up straighter, patting the spot beside her on the bed while holding the blanket open for Holly to join her.

"How did you even know we were up here?" Mike asks, wrapping a hand around the doorframe as his little sister steps into the room. He closes the door behind her, watching as Holly crosses over the rug and hops up onto his bed to sit down next to El. She slips beneath the blanket, letting El wrap it around her, too.

The little blonde shrugs, but there's a definite twinkle in her eye, "Nancy."

Mike just rolls his eyes at that, and he throws his head back as though in agony. "Of course she did." He grumbles, but the small smile still tugging at his lips doesn't go unnoticed by El, "Jesus, *of course*, she would."

"Hey, I can help with your makeup," El pauses, softly plucking at one of Holly's braids, "and hair..." she wraps the blonde strands around her finger, smiling at the girl, "while Mike finds the sweater." She shoots her boyfriend a look then, lips pursed.

Holly eagerly nods, and Mike smirks, left hand moving to his hip and his right pulling open his closet just as El adds, "And then you can show everyone downstairs."

"Alone," Mike mutters his breath.

"Mike!" El scolds him, only half-heartedly. She widens her eyes, tilts her head towards the small blonde on the bed comforter and mouths, "*sweater*."

"Okay, okay." He holds his hands up, spinning back around to face the open closet, "I'm looking, jeez." He smiles to himself, resting his forehead against the hangers before he dares a look back over at her, adoration clear on his face.

El spends a minute rummaging through Holly's makeup box — newly gifted to her by a friend of their mom's — and then she leans forward, whispering something in the girl's ear that only Holly can hear.

Whatever she says makes Holly giggle, and then they're back to looking through the kit. Mike takes that as his cue to get back inside

the closet.

El pulls out two small items, one a pink eyeshadow and the other green.

"Which one is more... *Christmas*?" El asks the girl, waving both eyeshadows around in her hands. When Holly goes to reach for the green one, she pulls it out of reach, eliciting another round of laughter from the young Wheeler girl.

"Green!"

"You know, green is Mike's favorite color." El points out, and she glances down at the palette.

"Then you should use it," Holly says in a hushed tone as though she's letting her in on a secret, pushing the green palette back towards El with a wiggle of her eyebrows. "He loves green *and* he loves you so..."

"Do you think so?" El stifles a laugh, completely in awe of the little girl. Discreetly looking back over her shoulder, she watches as Mike reaches up towards the top shelf of his closet. She can see *the* sweater at the back of the shelf, neatly folded beneath a bunch of other, chunkier knits.

Before she can point it out and tell him though, Mike is pinching the material between his fingers and pulling it forward, almost like he *knows* it's the one.

Feeling a smile take over her face at the thought, El turns back to the boy's little sister. Holly has opened up her palette and she's rubbing her middle finger into the pink dust. El pulls the blanket tighter around the girl's shoulders, uttering, "You know what?"

Holly grins, toothy and childlike and-so-endearing. She leans into El, holds up a hand against the side of her mouth and whispers, "What?"

"I think I might love him, too."

(They've said it before.)

(It'll never get old, though.)